



The President's Daily Brief

3 September 1969

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VIETNAM

Ho Chi Minh may be dead or so seriously ill that he cannot be expected to live for long.

A communiqué issued by North Vietnamese authorities early on 3 September, Hanoi time, announced that during "the past few weeks" the 79-year-old leader "has not been well," and that a team of experts had been assembled to provide him with constant care. A later communiqué noted that "his sickness is developing and tends to become critical." These statements strongly suggest an attempt to prepare the populace for a subsequent death announcement.

In response to the interest in this subject expressed by the Office of the President in California, we offer at annex some preliminary speculation on the possible consequences of Ho's death.

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SOVIET AFFAIRS

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LIBYA

The junta appears to be settling in. No opposition to its rule has appeared, and the republican radio is broadcasting long lists of those who allegedly have rallied behind the regime. King Idris arrived in Greece from Turkey today. His representative, Umar Shalhi [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] plans to come to the United States to continue his search for support.

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In Tripoli the Revolutionary Command Council has announced that rather than appointing a government, it will run the country itself. Its composition remains a mystery;

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Other than its tendency to use standard Arab radical rhetoric, there is no further evidence of the Command Council's political orientation.

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*FOR THE PRESIDENT ONLY*SPECULATION ON THE POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES
OF HO CHI MINH'S DEATH

In addition to today's announcements from Hanoi, a primary reason for believing that Ho Chi Minh may be dead or close to death is a series of Communist transport flights into North Vietnam during the past few days. Two special flights from Peking to North Vietnam were flown last week; this past week-end three separate VIP flights arrived from the USSR, China, and North Korea. Some of this travel could have involved medical assistance for Ho or delegations to North Vietnam's national day celebrations on 2 September, but the bulk of it probably reflected Hanoi's calling in representatives from its major Communist allies at a time of potential crisis. Both Moscow and Peking have important axes to grind in such a situation, but it is unlikely that the North Vietnamese would bring other Communist powers onto the scene if Ho were ill and the key issues were still in doubt.

Instead, it seems more likely that power probably already has passed--in fact, if not in name-- to Ho's successors and that they have called together their principal allies to inform them of the shape of a post-Ho leadership lineup, to spell out future regime policies, to ask for continued Communist support, and perhaps to head off any heavy handed meddling from abroad.

The last time Ho acted out a public role was in mid-June in connection with the founding of the Communists' "Provisional Revolutionary Government." Rumors that he was ill have

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appeared since then in the Hanoi diplomatic community, but like similar reports in the past, they were never confirmed and never acknowledged by the regime. The first solid clue that Ho was perhaps seriously ailing came on 1 September when the regime held its national day rally and Ho failed to put in his customary appearance. Last year, North Vietnam made a special point of alleging Ho's good health.

Confirmation that Ho has been seriously ill helps to explain evidence of disarray in North Vietnam during the past few months. Since at least last spring, when the regime held a prolonged strategy review and seemed to have set a relatively firm course for itself, there have been frequent signs of pulling and tugging within the leadership about the war, the negotiations, and domestic policies.

One example of this may be the apparent switch in Communist tactics on how to deal with the Saigon government. At the time of the bombing halt last October, and into the first part of this year, the Communists acted as if they had decided they eventually would have to sit down and negotiate in a forum including the South Vietnamese Government. Their consistent refusal to follow through since then, except in the formal sessions in Paris, may be only a tactical ploy, but it could also reflect difficulty in agreeing how and when to implement what was a tough and basic decision. This could easily have become an unmanageable problem while Ho was still alive but perhaps not exercising a firm hand at the helm.

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Further evidence of indecision or debate in the leadership can be seen more generally in the Paris talks and in Hanoi's entire politico-diplomatic effort since last spring. Immediately after the North Vietnamese concluded their strategy review, the Liberation Front announced its ten-point program on 8 May. A month later the Communists announced the formation of a "Provisional Revolutionary Government" in South Vietnam, presumably as another step in their scenario for a political settlement. Hanoi's top man in Paris, Politburo member Le Duc Tho, returned to the talks in early May and at the end of the month injected a whole new Communist tactic by suggesting privately to Ambassador Lodge that the US and North Vietnam should take up all issues in secret, bilateral discussions.

The momentum involved in this series of initiatives from the Communists seemed likely to be followed by developments; instead, paralysis set in, and since then the Communists have done nothing but stall in Paris. Le Duc Tho left for Hanoi in early July for reasons which were never apparent in terms of Communist strategy, especially in view of the decisions which presumably were made earlier in the spring. It now seems apparent that he has been huddling with other top members of the leadership because of Ho's declining condition.

Similar evidence of indecision or debate can be gleaned from North Vietnamese media, where it has been readily apparent that a sharp dispute has been going on over agricultural policy, over the familiar issue of how much of North Vietnam's

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resources should be devoted to the war, and over when and how to crack down on abuses of Marxist orthodoxy in economic and social affairs. It is quite conceivable that the failure of Communist forces in South Vietnam to initiate some of the offensive actions they have planned may have been caused in part by a leadership crisis in Hanoi.

Ho's demise would, of course, remove the man who has been the dominant figure in the Vietnamese Communist movement for nearly 40 years and who probably has many times exercised a final judgment in deciding policy disputes. His successors will be men who have generally managed to work together over the years in pursuit of broad common goals, but whose public statements in themselves reflect profound differences of approach on many basic issues. Ho's lingering illness and the uncertainties thus created may well have complicated the problem of coming up with agreements on specific policies and tactics.

Some kind of consensus on the regime's future course and on a new leadership probably was worked out prior to the first announcement that Ho has been ill. Ho may even have given his personal stamp of approval to some new hierarchy. In the short run, this probably will result in maintenance of continuity, perhaps with some fairly early tactical shifts. Over the longer haul, however, a new leadership probably will have trouble making and carrying out major decisions, especially if they depart significantly from past ones, without the benefit of Ho Chi Minh's personal prestige and authority.

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Only four men on the Party Politburo have clear shots at some of the principal power previously wielded by Ho. In their nominal party positions conferred at the last Party Congress in 1960, they are (1) Party First Secretary Le Duan; (2) theoretician and National Assembly Chairman Truong Chinh; (3) Premier Pham Van Dong; and (4) Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap. Their relative standing today probably is somewhat different.

Le Duan almost certainly has lost ground in the past year or so because many others disagreed with his policies of sacrificing virtually everything for the struggle in the South. He may have been sustained until now only by reason of a close personal relationship with Ho.

Truong Chinh will almost certainly emerge as a dominant personality, and perhaps the principal figure, in a new regime. His views have been featured prominently for more than a year, and the country and the war probably have been headed in the directions he laid down in a long report last summer. A major question mark is his health. He spent nearly two months in East Germany between April and July receiving medical treatment and recuperating from an operation.

Truong Chinh probably is allied with Defense Minister Giap in advocating a cautious and protracted application of the tactics of a "people's war" to the struggle in the South, and in trying to ensure that the strength of the regime in the North is preserved and built up along strict Marxist lines.

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It is widely believed that Communist tactics in South Vietnam during the last year are a direct result of Giap's influence and that he probably opposed the more reckless offensive efforts of the first part of 1968.

Premier Pham Van Dong probably would retain his post or might even advance to the presidency in a post-Ho leadership lineup. He may well be a solid member of the Chinh-Giap camp and stay where he is as head of the government apparatus.

We cannot forecast with any confidence what specific policies might be pursued by a leadership dominated by Truong Chinh and supported by Giap and Pham Van Dong. All these men are deeply committed to the struggle in the South and bent on the achievement of at least certain minimal objectives before giving any ground themselves. Any shifts in policy probably would emerge only gradually, but they might well take the direction that much of the recent evidence suggests: preparing to fight the war over the long haul if this proves necessary, but being ready to shift the struggle largely to the political arena if the time seems right and enough opportunities for eventual Communist success are left open.

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